DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 212 119 EC 141 536

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TITLE Special Classes for the Gifted and Talented: A Review of Research in the Republic of China (Taiwan).
PUB DATE Aug 81
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the World Conference on Gifted and Talented Children (4th, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, August 21-25, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Anxiety; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; *Gifted; *Self Concept; *Special Classes; *Talent
IDENTIFIERS *Taiwan

ABSTRACT

The presentation reviews research on the status of special educational programs for gifted and talented students in Taiwan. The effects of special class settings on gifted students' anxiety levels as well as on their self concept are considered. The author suggests that the studies cited do not demonstrate negative effects of special classes: anxiety does not appear to be significantly different between gifted children in special classes and regular children; nor are deleterious influences shown for gifted students' self concepts. (CL)

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# Special Classes for the Gifted and Talented: A Review of Research in the Republic of China ( Taiwan )

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## I. INTRODUCTION

During the past decade, the special education in the Republic of China has been expanded through a series of pilot programs for the intellectually exceptional children, including the mildly retarded, the gifted and talented. A rapidly increasing number of special classes, mostly self-contained classes, have been set up for this purpose and a remarkable number of special class teachers have been trained to meet this emerging need. As a result, over the past few years the special class programs at the regular primary and junior high schools have begun to outnumber the special school programs in terms of pupil enrollment and number of teachers.

The burgeoning move of special classes went along with a tidal wave of ability grouping in junior high school around 1970 when school teachers found that their classes were too large and heterogeneous to conduct effective teaching without grouping. The Republic of China began to prolong school-leaving age from 12 to 15. In 1968, nine years of free and non-selective basic education was enforced; but due to insufficient resources of teachers and classrooms, the classes were generally very large and the teaching load of regular teachers was too heavy that teachers had much difficulty taking good care of children with special needs. For this reason, special classes were established in certain parts of the country on an experimental basis. The special classes are different from

Paper presented at the Fourth World Conference on Gifted and Talented Children, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, August 21-25, 1981

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upper and lower stream classes of the schools where ability grouping is practiced, in the sense that they are conducted by the teachers with special education training and their curriculum is specifically designed or adapted to suit the special needs of their subjects. Take a special class for the gifted for example, some kind of enriched curriculum is taught by teachers with special education training, and its class size is comparatively small (under 30 in most classes). By contrast, upper stream classes of the schools, where homogeneous ability grouping is practiced, are conducted by regular teachers with regular curriculum and with emphasis on preparing the students for taking the very competitive entrance examination of prestigious senior high schools.

Ever since 1973, the Ministry of Education has conducted a nation-wide experimental program for the gifted and for the musically talented pupils; more than one hundred self-contained special classes for the gifted and some twenty special classes for the musically talented have been established in thirty primary and junior high schools scattered around the country. The whole program caters to a total number of three thousand children from first to eighth grade (the ninth grade will be covered by the program in the coming academic year).

For those classes set up for the gifted, subjects are first selected through a screening test, and then a series of standardized intelligence tests including Standard-Binet, WISC, Raven Progressive Matrice, Torrance Test of Creative Thinking and others are administered to upper 10 to 15 percent screened as potential candidates. With regards to the special classes for the musically talented, the musical talent of children is evaluated through their performance with musical instruments and through a series of musical aptitude tests. These special classes are benefited by special funds provided by the educational authorities for purchasing necessary equipment and materials. Adding

to this privilege, teachers of special classes enjoy better pay, more opportunity for in-service training and other educational experiences.

In very recent years, critics of self-contained special classes begin to draw public attention. Local educators are increasingly aware of the fact that gifted children grouped together in special classes are overwhelmed with expectations and excessive pressure, which may be detrimental to their personality development and social adjustment. There is more and more support, both from within and outside the profession of special education for mainstreaming the gifted, and resource room program is becoming a popular alternative in Taiwan. The Ministry of Education formally suggested in 1980 the resource room model as an alternative program in which the pupils identified as the gifted be spending short periods of time every or every other schoolday withdrawn from the regular classroom. These children meet with other gifted and creative peers within the resource room through enrichment and entension activities. The resource teachers are also qualified teachers with special education training.

Over the last few years, research literature on gifted and talented children are increasing; part of them are selected and published by the Ministry of Education in an annual entitled "Education for Gifted and Talented Children." A special quarterly for teachers and parents of gifted children has been published recently by the Special Education Center of National Taiwan Normal University; a number of research papers can also be found in this periodical. With increasing awareness that special classes for the gifted have not been so effective as they should be, many studies deal with comparison between those gifted with special education programs and those who are not, or in some studies, between gifted children and their average peers. These studies cover a wide variety of subjects including academic achievement,

rapid reading, body image, self concept, educational attitude of the parents, interpersonal relationship, verbal fluency and comprehension ... etc. Among these studies, the heart of the issues is focused on the effectiveness and problems of special class model, both in view of academic achievement and of personality adjustment. Although it is still too early to draw a definite conclusion with respect to the special class model for the gifted, a review of relevant literatures might be valuable to spotlight the problems and to find some evidences for further consideration.

## II. ANXIETY IN GIFTED CHILDREN

There is much research attempting to determine the effects of special class setting on the anxiety level in the gifted children. It is a popular view that gifted children in the special class tend to be more anxious because of long time pressure of expectation and constant tension of competition with their classmates. Even though gifted pupils in the special class perform better than their average peers in regular classes, they are rather isolated and segregated in a way, from the rest of the school and can be perceived by themselves as inferior in comparison with their bright classmates, especially whenever they fail to attain parental expectations. An individual is fearful of losing self-worth in the eyes of others when he anticipates failure; he is particularly anxious when there is an approaching testing situation. It is also assumed that such feelings of uneasiness in the classroom may persist and be pervasive in many life situations, and thus become a response pattern.

With respect to this popular hypothesis, the research findings do not seem very consistent; it lacks supportive evidence; it is too hasty to assert that the gifted in the special class have a higher anxiety level than their peers in regular classes. A study on this issue was undertaken by Wu-Tien Wu, who compared 611 gifted children in experimental classes of 3rd grade to 5th

grade with a control group consisted of an equivalent number of gifted children who have not withdrawn from regular classes. General Anxiety Scale for Chinese Children (GASCC, an adaptation of GASC) and Test Anxiety Scale for Chinese Children (TASCC, an adaptation of TASC) were administered to both groups. Wu found that the gifted in special classes scored significantly higher (more anxious) on test anxiety scale but scored lower on general anxiety scale for every grade. The investigator concluded that the gifted children in special classes were emotionally more stable, they felt more confident and secure, and less anxious in general life situations. The reason for a higher score in test anxiety is that the special class students were labeled as gifted children, and they upheld a higher level of aspiration and were more fearful of possible failure in testing situation, because they were among a group of high calibre.

A study investigating the difference between measures of anxiety for the gifted group of special classes and average children of regular classes was conducted by Hai-Ching Lin. GASCC, TASCC and CCMAS (Chinese Chidlren's Manifest Anxiety Scale) were administered to both groups of 4th and 5th grade pupils, a total of 233. It was found that there were no significant differences between the two groups in all three anxiety scales. The conclusion refutes the major hypothesis of this investigation that the gifted in special classes tend to be more anxious than their peers in regular classes. However, in the sample of fifth graders, there was significant difference between the two groups with respect to the manifest anxiety; the gifted group seemed to have more anxiety symptoms. In regard to the sexual difference among the gifted group, girls were markedly above boys in general anxiety scale and test anxiety scale.

A similar study was also conducted by Wen-chi Liu in comparison of gifted children with IQ above 146 and average children. Its sample consisted of 100 primary school pupils from 1st to 3rd

grade. Test Anxiety Scale for Chinese Children (TASCC) was used and the result confirmed previous finding of Lin that no significant difference was found between the two groups.

Another similar study on anxiety was carried out in offshore island - Quemoy, by Ching-li Tzeng and his colleagues. The same instruments for measuring anxiety were applied to gifted children grouped together in special classes and their average peers in regular classes of fourth and fifth grade; the total sample for this study was 147. The lack of difference between the two groups was noted and it was also observed that measures of anxiety was significantly lower for boys than for girls.

## III. THE EFFECTS OF SPECIAL CLASS GROUPING UPON SELF-CONCEPT

The effects of grouping for special class have probably been debated more frequently with respect to its emotional and social aspects than with respect to its effects on academic achievement. Aside from the studies already reviewed on the anxiety in gifted children, there are a substantial number of observation reports and research papers regarding the influences of special class conditions upon the gifted's self-concept. But just as the research evidence has been rather scanty, there has been little agreement among findings of research, so has there been insufficient evidences to support the widely held opinion, or condition, that the grouping of gifted children homogeneously together in special class is detrimental to the development of desirable attitudes and positive self-concepts. The reason for this meagre conformity of opinion may be due to different conditions of special class setting, teacher's attitude in particular, and the lack of equivalence among self-concept measurements (many researchers develop their own instruments for their particular study). As it is commonly known, definitions of self-concepts are generally imprecise and vary from one study to the next. Most of the instruments are self-report questionnaires, students

may select responses which they know to be socially desirable rather than responses that are self-descriptive. However, even with the difficulties of investigation mentioned above, the research literature available on this issue is still valuable to spotlight the problem.

A study on the effects of special class grouping upon the self-concept of gifted children was conducted by this Investigator (Wei-fan Kuo). The Investigator made a comparison of the self-concepts of two equivalent gifted groups: one group was composed of 611 children of both sexes from self-contained special classes, and the other group was composed of the same number of children with equivalent intelligence level but sampling from regular classes; both groups were the 3rd to 5th graders.

The Self-Attitude Inventory of Children (SAIC) was administered in this study. It is an instrument developed by the Investigator and has been widely used in Taiwan as a measure of general self-concept. The Investigator defines self-attitude as a person's perception of himself and his evaluation customarily maintained with regard to himself in various aspects of life situation. In other words, self-attitude is a personal judgement of worthiness related to the concept of how the individual perceives himself and is conveyed by verbal reports.

The SAIC contains 80 items; 16 items for each of the five facets of self-attitude. These facets are: (1) Attitude towards one's physical appearance (Ph subscale); (2) Attitude towards one's ability and achievement (A subscale); (3) Attitude towards one's personality and behavioral attributes (P subscale); (4) Attitude towards one's external world including social relations with the others (E subscale); and (5) Personal belief and Hierarchical value system (B subscale).

The result of this investigation indicates that the gifted of special classes were significantly lower in the total scores

on the SAIC than their gifted peers studied in regular classes. In other words, their self-concepts were relatively negative in comparison with their counterparts. They tended to see themselves as inadequate, felt less confident, and had much difficulty in accepting themselves as learners. In analyzing the five subscales, it was found that except in Ph subscale, there were significant differences between the two gifted groups in four subscales and the gifted children from special classes were relatively negative in every aspect. In other words, they did not see themselves as intelligent and capable (A subscale); they did not like themselves as much as their counterparts did (P subscale); they were more hostile to the external world (E subscale); and finally they were more pessimistic and skeptical (B subscale).

A comparative study of the gifted pupils grouped together in special classes with their peers of average intelligence from regular classes was conducted by Chao-shiung Chen. Two groups of 160 3rd and 4th grade pupils from two different primary schools in Taipei were chosen for this purpose. In this study, Chen applied W. Fitts's Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, which is adapted into Chinese by An-teh Lee. The instrument was designed to measure self-concept representing four aspects: (1) Identity -- what he is; (2) Self satisfaction -- how he accepts himself; (3) Behavior -- how he acts. Each aspect has its score while a total score can also be obtained. Fitts's scale also suggests a multifaceted self-concept. The items of the scale can be clustered into five facets of the self-concept: (1) physical self, (2) moral and ethical self, (3) personal self, (4) family self, and (5) social self.

It was found that no significant difference could be noted in the total score of this scale; however, in making a comparative analysis between the gifted and their average peers, aspect by aspect, the results indicated that the gifted group scored higher on the aspect of "Behavior -- how he acts," but scored lower on

the aspect of "Self satisfaction" and "How he accepts himself." In discussing these findings, the investigator assumed that the gifted behaved more adequately in life situations; nevertheless, they felt less satisfied with themselves and had a large discrepancy between their perceived self and their ideal self.

An analysis of each facet between the two groups, it was found that there was no significant difference between the gifted and the average group except on the facet of personal self. Such a result also indicates and confirms that the gifted have a less favorable attitude towards their own personal qualities.

The measures of self-concept scale were compared also between 105 gifted junior high school students and the same number of average students by Rhei-huan Huang. The self-concept scale was developed by the investigator himself in attempting to evaluate "subjective self" - "ideal self" congruence and self-acceptance. The results indicated that the self-concept of the gifted was significantly more positive than their average peers, and they had possessed a brighter image of ideal self and also had a well-developed self identity. It was noted that the gifted accepted themselves much better.

## IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Given the fact that self-contained special class is a predominant model of the gifted education in Taiwan, the issue of whether such an educational placement is likely to facilitate or to hinder the social and personal development of those being grouped together has drawn public concern. The heart of the issue is more on the affective aspect rather on the cognitive aspect. There have been many research evidences demonstrating the benefits of special class grouping with respect to academic achievement. The gifted pupils who are grouped together in experimental classes have already made much progress in comparison

with the control group. It is evident that the benefits are not just due to the special class scheme but because of many advantages and privileges that the special classes have enjoyed, and among them small class-size and teacher's experiences in individualized instruction are two factors of particular significance.

In very recent years, there are more and more educators in the country who advocate resource room model as an alternative approach. However, there has been very few research evidences to justify the superiority of resource room scheme. Among the arguments in favor of mainstreaming the gifted, the focus is on the affective and social domain. It has been widely discussed on the damaging effect of special class placement, excessive pressure of teacher's and parental expectations, keen competition among the gifted in special class, meritocracy and snobbism, ... etc. For the same concern, this Investigator has attempted to verify whether special classroom condition had a debilitating effect on the self-concept of the gifted and whether they suffered more in chronic anxiety.

The studies reviewed by this Investigator are limited to what had been undertaken in the Republic of China, with research evidences seem to be inconsistant, though not necessarily contradictory. It is difficult to draw a clear-cut conclusion of the whole pecture, since there are still little supports to popular opinions which assert the disadvantages and negative side of special class placement. It is suggested that more empirical studies and further investigation on this issue are needed.

Put aside all these debates and arguments, it is acknowledged that the self-contained special classes for the gifted cater for only a small number of lucky children who have enjoyed lots of privileges in educational experiences, and the selection of these children are rather arbitrary, because everything is decided by a cut-off point on standardized tests. For those who meet the

criteria, they receive individualized assistance, but for those who do not, they have to sink or swim in the regular classroom setting. Just for this reason, the Investigator is in favor of the continued expansion of resource rooms for the gifted children.